

**The Interplay of Codes and Expressions In
Middle Class Houses In Sri Lanka**

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This paper presents part findings from ongoing PhD research in the Bartlett school of Architecture, University College London, to understand the diversity of contemporary middle class house forms in Sri Lanka in relation to their spatial cultures. The paper is in two parts. Part 1, discusses the focus of the overall research in the context in which the study is undertaken and proceeds to part 2 to illustrate some findings in that light. The hand out summarises this presentation. (opening slide 1)

Part 1

Until about 1970 there was only a single commonly known way of 'house building' in the Sri Lankan middle class society. Houses were free standing with lush green gardens around, with vistas from the house to their front gardens and to the neighbourhood, the 'style' popularly known as the 'Bungalow'. House forms of the contemporary Sri Lankan middle class have diversified rapidly in the recent years. House building today, employs many strategies resulting in a morphologically and stylistically heterogeneous popular residential architecture. In a typical street, houses range from 'sprawling' single storey types to 'compact' two or three storey types, built upon the plot boundaries in small plots, with 'pockets' of postage-stamp sized greenery as courtyards or gardens. The range in facades, roofs, and decoration add to this diversity. (slide 2)

Recent urbanisation in Sri Lanka, a relatively new phenomenon, may be attributed to the situation, which has resulted in higher residential population densities in the Colombo Metropolitan region. However, buildable area in Colombo is limited on account of the fact that the sea bounds it on the West and the wetlands in the East. This has resulted in high demand for buildable land, which has resulted in greater land fragmentation. (CMR structure plan 1998) It is within this context, that the middle class houses in the Colombo Metropolitan region had taken the peculiar form as illustrated earlier as an array of different house forms that were not seen in the earlier periods. (Emmanuel 2002) (slide 3)

Although larger pieces of land have been fragmented to provide for new houses in the city and suburbs, an alternative approach has been to build speculative housing in the suburbs. In speculative housing schemes such as Rukmalgama and Opanayake that were built as early experiments in the early 80's, most houses were altered beyond recognition that they were part of the original housing estate. This experience prompted the developers that unless the owner is given a free hand in the decision making process, house building as a 'commodity' would not have the marketability among the Colombo middle class. Developers have diversified their approach to housing to accommodate the owner's free hand in the process. Hence the resentment of 'commonality' and investment on 'exclusivity' in house forms is an apparent

phenomenon in the making of 'home', among the middle class today. When the act of making 'home' is pressurised by forces that were not operative before, such as new planning and building regulations or land restrictions, the middle class have reacted in unconventional ways to resolve their preferred housing forms. (Slide 5) *restraint of community individuality upheld*

Professional architects of today regard the heterogeneity of the present middle class houses in Sri Lanka as 'kitsch'; attributed to 'bad taste' which Bourdieu views as the construction of the bourgeois from the ordinary. (Bourdieu 1986) If architecture is believed to be 'not for architects' but for people, this phenomenon of aspired heterogeneity in the 'popular architecture' cannot be negated as 'kitsch', as it manifests the needs and aspirations of the contemporary middle class society.

My attempt in this context is to understand, although outwardly heterogeneous whether and how these house forms represent the 'cultural traits' of the contemporary middle class society of Sri Lanka. Culture represents the common 'ways of thinking' in a society referred to as the unquestioned and 'taken for granted' component of social knowledge. (Bernstein 1990, Hillier and Hanson 1984, Levi - Strauss 1963) It is believed that such 'cultural ideas are objectively present in artefacts as much as they are subjectively present in minds'. (Hillier, Hanson and Graham 1986, Glassie 1975) When popular architecture of the masses is represented by such a wide repertoire, can cultural ideas as common knowledge influence 'home making' in the contemporary Sri Lankan middle class society? If so, can there be unsaid agreement beyond the manifested diversity of house forms? What is the nature of such agreement? If so, how does this tacit, shared knowledge vary in the investment as individual houses to make 'home'? (slide 6) *quite question*

To understand whether there is agreement beneath the diversity, the paper illustrates the manner and nature in which the outward diversification of house form is transformed into spatial relations in houses. The phenomena manifested in house forms are inevitably a mixture of personal idiosyncrasies pertaining to non-cultural ideas interwoven with societal conventions pertaining to cultural ideas at a given point in time. Social theory in the Structuralist approach distinguishes between the 'societal' and the 'idiosyncratic' manifestations in society by applying the idea of the 'pattern', which is to identify consistencies in relations between variables as an underlying structure in a set of rules. Such consistencies are viewed to manifest tacit social knowledge that operates as a code. (Glassie 1975, Levi - Strauss 1963, Leach, 1976, Atkinson 1985, Giddens 1995) (slide 7) *codes*

Bernstein argues that, a code is more than a set of rules but is able to integrate rules, forms of realisations and contexts to create a meaningful whole. (Bernstein 1990) This integration is within two realms, as invisible and the visible, (figure 1) and acknowledges that if the means for transformation between codes and communication can be accomplished, the invisible can be recovered from the visible. (Bernstein 1990) The "invisible realm" of Bernstein's illustration is parallel to Hillier's idea of social knowledge as he argues, "In social knowledge, we take the abstract principles for granted in order to create Spatio-temporal phenomena and in this way transmit and reproduce the underlying codes that make society work". (Figure 2, Hillier 1996) implying that a reverse procedure should be possible to understand the nature of invisible underlying principles through exploring the manifested, visible, textual productions of Spatio-temporal phenomena as the means for transformation are abstract principles related to

spatial configuration. Therefore, if spatial relations of the middle class houses if examined should reveal recurrent themes or patterns, directing to principles that govern their reproduction that this paper investigates. If houses share common patterns of space, how do they vary between each other in making 'home' from a house? Codes, limit the possibilities of common action, but could be orchestrated permitting enough flexibility in the practices of everyday life, without being rigid obedience to rules. (Bordieu 1977) This aspect of making 'home' will be the discussion of a subsequent paper.

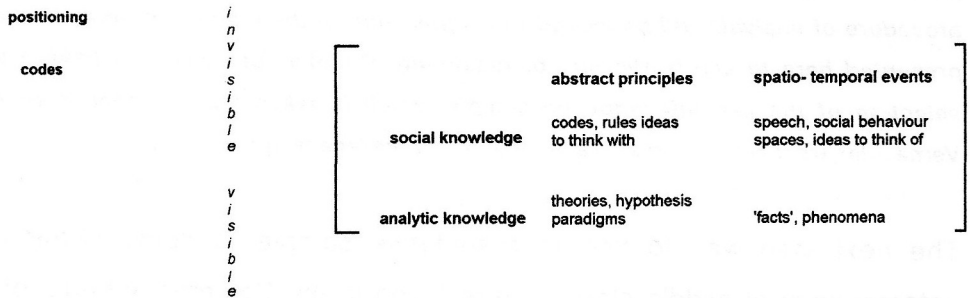


fig 1

Part 2

In summary this paper illustrates the spatial structure within the 'domestic space code', in a sample of 30 houses representing the contemporary Sri Lankan middle class house forms. The houses have been selected to be on the extremes of possible outward heterogeneity within the present range of houses in Colombo and suburbs. The 'space code' is illustrated in two parts. Firstly as a hypothetical set of consistent rules as a possible relationship between built form patterns, activity patterns and generic function patterns as illustrated in phase 1, which is the subject of this paper. The method for doing so has been the application of space - syntax methods developed in the Bartlett school of Architecture, University College London, used together with statistical analysis. Phases 2 and 3, will be sequels to this paper which will illustrate how the aforesaid invisible structure of space is expressed in social behaviour, thoughts and objects as cultural traits for which qualitative Research methods are used. Through the synthesis of such a code, it should be possible to explain the realities resulting in not only consistencies but in diversities, as it is believed that every house is an orchestration of this structure and expressions. (Figure3) *→ This paper does not discuss phases 2 & 3*

Results show that there is much stronger form of homogeneity in the spatial arrangements though outwardly heterogeneous, ~~in built form~~. However, the spatial structure of the sample of 30 houses conforms to two space codes not one. Hence the outward diversity is transformed into two space codes named as the 'O' code, the name denoting that spatial structures are centred around patterns of 'occupation' and the 'M' code, denoting that spatial structures are centred around patterns of 'movement' in the houses. The following section illustrates the differences in spatial relations between the two codes by referring to two examples. I will only

refer to one example of each type to make my points clear. Figures 4(O) and 4(M) are the floor plans of the two houses, which should be read in conjunction with other figures below.

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As seen in figure 5(O) and 5(M), the colour code ranging from red, orange, yellow, green and blue in respective order represents the configurational importance of the particular space in relation to the overall arrangement of spaces of the house, which have been measured by using space-syntax methods. This is also numerically expressed by the values given for the spaces named as 'integration value'. 'Integration' is a measure of 'the extent to which each spatial element contributes to drawing the whole configuration together, into a more or less direct relationship', expressed as a value. (Hanson 1998) Low integration values indicate more integration and higher the value lesser the space is integrated in the arrangement. The small rectangles show the accessibility from one space to the other.

In the 'O' code, the 'central nerve' spaces of the house are occupation spaces denoted in red ~~such as~~ the dining, sitting and also the utility in this case. The two verandas in this house, (denoted in yellow) flank it at the front and the back of the house which make two entrances and are the next most central spaces. The kitchen and office in blue 'lone' spaces in the arrangement are entered through the verandas. The bedrooms connect to the central nerve spaces directly, as this house does not have any circulation spaces such as corridors or lobbies. Therefore all spaces can be occupied for household activities to take place in desired patterns. The overall integration value of this house is 1.05, which indicates a high level of overall integration illustrating that every space in the house is well within reach of each other making a cohesive network of spaces.

Let us compare this with a 'M' code house. The example is typical of the 'M' code in which the spaces are organised around patterns of 'movement' through the house. The central nerve spaces in red are circulation spaces such as lobbies and stairs. Compared to the 'O' code in which the 'central nerve' spaces were occupation spaces, no activities take place in the 'nerve' spaces of this code as these are for movement to other spaces. Compared to the 'O' code the occupation spaces such as the dining or sitting are in orange, yellow and green, indicating a less configurational importance. The overall integration value is 1.41 in this house indicating that spaces do not operate as a strong network as 'reachability' from one another is weak. The graph below (Figure 8) indicates the integration values of the sample as a whole. The 'O' code houses have an overall integration values below the mean of the sample indicating a network of spaces that are well within reach to each other. The 'M' code houses have an overall integration values above the mean of the sample indicating a network of spaces that are segregated from each other within the houses. (slide 11) → summary of what is

In the 'O' code house, if household members move from the front to the back of the house or to move between the bedrooms usually on the right and the left, it is inevitable to go through the centre. Hence it is a 'real' centre in which occupational activities take place while other household members pass through. The position of the 'central nerve spaces' has a crucial role to bring the arrangement of spaces together, thereby bringing people together through the spatial arrangement. As the central spaces are in key positions that household members move through it is likely that each other is aware of each other's presence and hence likely to communicate with each other actively or passively when passing through the unavoidable central space.

The figures 6(O) and 6(M) uses the same colour code to represent the spaces as circles and the accessibility from each other by a line. It also indicates how the spaces are layered in relation to the exterior. The type of space whether a, b, c or d is a measure of potential movement through the space. The d type spaces have the most potential followed by c type, b type the a type having the least potential being terminal spaces. As seen in figures 6(O), the central nerve

spaces of the 'O' code makes a ring with the exterior through the two entry verandas so that if one route is closed, the spatial structure breaks down. The ringy relationship of the spaces to the exterior has a profound effect on the overall spatial configuration, which is therefore crucial in maintaining the code.

This if compared to the 'M' code is radically different. As seen in figure 6(M), the 'M' code house is organised as sub-complexes which are brought together by the central spaces for movement as highlighted. The role of the central nerve spaces in red is to facilitate movement between these sub-complexes. The visitor's spaces are in sub-complex 1 separated from the home-owner's spaces in sub-complex 3, which are also separated from the servant's spaces who are in sub complex 2. Unlike in the 'O' code when people move between the sub-complexes they do not have to cross the occupation spaces but the circulation spaces which have been provided for that ~~which makes the 'nerve'~~. As the paths of various user groups do not cross each other limited communication, and awareness of presence between the user groups can be expected. The 'core' of this code allows for almost zero active or passive interactions amongst user groups. Therefore this code is about putting the people in the house apart, compared to the 'O' code whose function was to bring them together in a discreet and organised manner.

Figure8

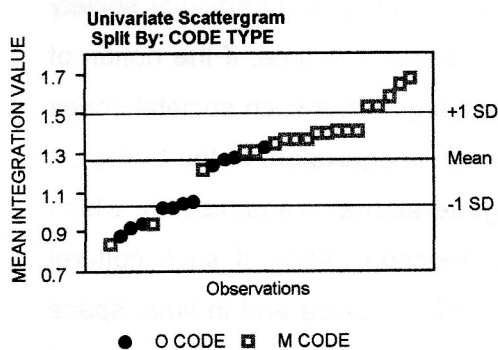
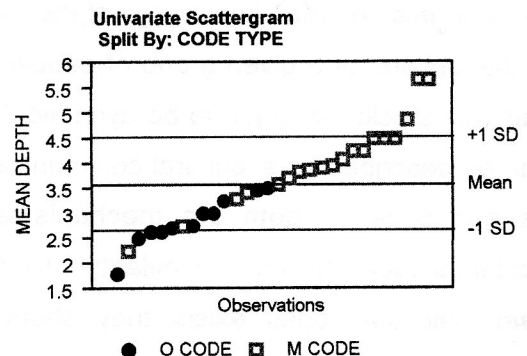


Figure9

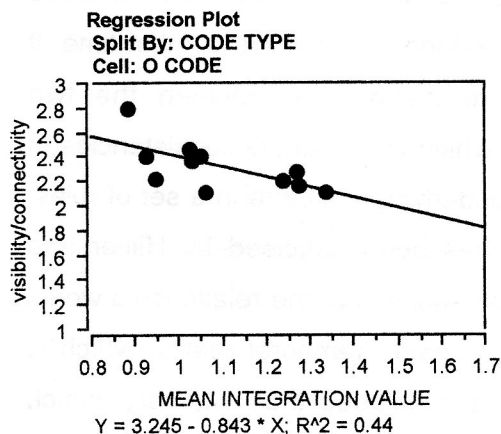


As a result of the two different ways of layering space in figures 6(O) and 6(M), the 'O' code houses are 'shallow' in depth and the 'M' code houses are deep as illustrated in the graph in figure 9 above. This different layering of spaces which works together with the 'networking' effect as indicated by the integration values as earlier provides the basis for the two operative codes of space. *(slide for depth)*

In the 'O' code, the family occupies the first space from the front entrance, the veranda (outer sitting) in the evening chatting to each other while not losing sight of the happenings of the neighbourhood as vistas from this space extend to the garden and neighbourhood. Hence interestingly the front facades of most 'O' code houses are in fact 'voids' or open to the roadside. If the front door is closed during the day, the neighbours pop into the back veranda easily accessible as a space in layer 1. A neighbour may pop in for a short chat either to the front or back veranda but cannot go into the 'central nerve' spaces unless invited as they are located 'deep' in layer 3, which is not easily accessible. The spaces are layered in such a way in the 'O' code making the peripheral spaces a threshold for the uninvited visitor, and the household chooses to come out to meet them rather than taking them in. The central spaces are used by the household and invited visitors who are allowed to pass through the 'filter spaces' in the front and the 'back' to interact actively in dining or interact passively when moving through the occupation spaces. There is a subtle control mechanism to maintain and to differentiate the degree of desired interaction among the user groups which is achieved by

Figure 11(M)

Evidence suggests that the 'O' code relates to a situation in which the members of the household interact intensively and the neighbourhood are 'known' to each other perhaps to a situation that was present in the middle class neighbourhoods before rapid urbanisation. Evidence suggests that the 'M' code relates to a situation in which intensive interaction within the household is not required and so with the neighbourhood, being 'unknown'. Although it is not possible to draw a conclusion before the next phase of work, this may point to a new situation arisen as a result of urbanisation, in which the societal network is more 'transpatial' than 'spatial'. (Hillier 1996)



The two identified space codes, as abstract structures of space, are expected to represent different ways of practices in everyday life. These abstract principles of space organisation have to be decoded and comprehended by people who use the space, if they unconsciously accept what the structures they have adopted mean to them and if they conduct their daily lives accordingly. Can the nature of interplay between structures and practices in the conduct of everyday life be understood? Is it possible to identify the extent of regulation imposed by the codes (degree of control) and the how much of orchestration (degree of flexibility) is allowed in the two codes in everyday life? If codes were limits but not rigid controls of possibility in organisation of space, the people would have diversified the code, without losing sight of their regulative nature. (Bordieu 1977) The sequel to this paper hopes to investigate into this phenomenon.

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